

Christ Community Covenant Church
Philippians 3: 'When God's Children Suffer'
Pastor Dave Scherrer - September 23, 2012

Working our way through this 'occasional' letter – the occasion was that Paul was in prison under authority of the Romans. Paul had been arrested in Jerusalem and after facing Jewish authorities called the Sanhedrin where they vowed to ambush Paul and murder him. But the plot was discovered and Paul was delivered to the Governor in the city of Caesarea, a man named Felix. Felix let him rot in jail for two years there and eventually a new governor was appointed, a man named Festus. Festus arranged for Paul to testify before the puppet king of Israel, King Agrippa II. In Acts 26 (v28) we read how effectively and passionately Paul shared about Christ. Finally they packaged Paul up for Rome and an appointment with Caesar, Nero at this time. The trip to Rome by boat was terrible, but he finally made it and then he spent two years in Rome under house arrest. It was during this time that scholars believe that this little letter was written, as well as the letter to the church in Ephesus and Colossi, and the personal letter to Philemon.

In the first chapter of this little letter we read of Paul's appeal for unity in the Church, (v27)

"Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel."

Then last week we saw Paul's great celebration of Jesus who emptied Himself of His position at God's right hand and humbled himself to the point of death on a cross. And we saw the answer to the problems of the people in our lives, to consider them as more important than ourselves. It is the unity of Christ and the humility of Christ that we seek as followers of Christ.

That brings us now to a wonderful passage in chapter 3 for today. A passage about suffering! You may be thinking how can a passage about suffering be so wonderful? Let's just see:

Philippians 3:8-11

More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, and may be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know him, and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings, being conformed to his death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Not that I have already obtained it, or have already become perfect, but I press on in order that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Preparing for Suffering: A severe mercy

Suffering is a given as a follower of Christ.

Acts 14:22

strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.

John 15:20

Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you.

1 Peter 4:12

Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.

2 Timothy 3:12

Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

Tell me about suffering? (Invite comments from the congregation)

Why should we expect suffering if we are to be good Christians?

Why should we look forward to suffering if we are Christians, what is the benefit to our lives?

Suffering is nothing more than the taking away of things that the world offers for our enjoyment—reputation, esteem among peers, job, money, spouse, sexual life, children, friends, health, strength, sight, hearing, success, etc. When these things are taken away (by force or by circumstance or by choice), we suffer. But if we have followed Paul and the teaching of Jesus and have already counted them as loss for the surpassing value of gaining Christ, then we are prepared to suffer.

Suffering is a form of God's severe mercy. It is his way of getting our attention and giving us a glimpse into the deep places of Jesus. It is an act of kindness and love on God's behalf.

Experiencing Suffering: As a good soldier of Jesus Christ (2 Timothy 2:3)

Over a hundred years ago Horatius Bonar, the Scottish pastor and hymn-writer, wrote a little book called *Night of Weeping, or, When God's Children Suffer*. In it he said his goal was, "to minister to the saints . . . to seek to bear their burdens, to bind up their wounds, and to dry up at least some of their many tears." It is a tender and deep and wise book. So it's not surprising to hear him say,

"It is written by one who is seeking himself to profit by trial, and trembles lest it should pass by as the wind over the rock, leaving it as hard as ever; by one who would in every sorrow draw near to God that he may know Him more, and who is not unwilling to confess that as yet he knows but little." **Horatius Bonar, *When God's Children Suffer***

"Contrary to what might be expected, I look back on experiences that at the time seemed especially desolating and painful with particular satisfaction. Indeed, I can say with complete truthfulness that everything I have learned in my 75 years in this world, everything that has truly enhanced and enlightened my experience, has been through affliction and not through happiness." Malcolm Muggeridge, in *Homemade*, July, 1990.

As a good soldier – following a King who has difficult orders for us to follow. Sometimes military orders lead to horrific hardships, sometimes military commanders send their soldiers into sure death. They do it out of love for their Kingdom, for their King at home. And good soldiers suffer. Interestingly enough, bad soldiers suffer too. Everyone suffers some. The difference is that good soldiers contribute and grow in their obedience.

Purpose in Suffering: Intimacy with Christ

There is a difference between simple hardship and spiritual suffering. Suffering and hardship is suffering and hardship, regardless of its source. But there is a special kind of suffering that comes from having a heart broken by the things that breaks God's heart. When my pain is the result of my direct sacrifice for Christ; that is spiritual suffering. It is different than hitting my thumb with a hammer. It is an agony that we feel when someone dies without knowing Christ. It is the sadness of fellow saints who are in need. It is the sense of weight for churches that bend under the sway of a fallen culture. This is suffering too. But in that suffering there is a oneness that we feel with Christ when we feel what he feels. There is a connection that Paul and Peter had because they were beat and whipped as he was. They could say "now I know how he felt."

Have you ever lost a friend? Now you know how Jesus felt.
Have you ever wanted for the comfort of warmth? Now you know how Jesus felt.
Have you ever been betrayed? Now you know how Jesus felt.
Have you ever felt pain that brought you to your knees? Now you know what Jesus felt.

God helps us prepare for suffering by teaching us and showing us that through suffering we are meant to go deeper in our relationship with Christ. You get to know him better when you share his pain. The people who write most deeply and sweetly about the preciousness of Christ are people who have suffered with him deeply.

When Stephen was arrested and put on trial for his faith and given a chance to preach, the upshot was that the religious leaders were enraged and ground their teeth at him. They were just about to drag him out of the city and kill him. At just that moment, Luke tells us,

Acts 7:55

But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God.

"Stephen was full of the Holy Spirit and gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at the right hand of God". There is a special revelation, a special intimacy, prepared for those who suffer with Christ.

Peter (1 Peter 4:14) put it this way,

1 Peter 4:14

If you are insulted for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you.

In other words God reserves a special coming and resting of his Spirit and his glory on his children who suffer for his name.

What this means practically:

1. It means that whenever I am called upon to choose between anything in this world and Christ, **I choose Christ.**
2. It means that I will deal with the things of this world in ways that draw me nearer to Christ so that **I gain more of Christ** and enjoy more of him by the way I use the world.
3. It means that I will always deal with the things of this world in ways that show that they are not my treasure, but rather show that **Christ is my treasure.**
4. It means that if I lose any or all the things this world can offer, I will not lose my joy or my treasure or my life, because **Christ is all.**

Matthew 13:44

The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field.

Nothing should keep us back from the hope and the goal of Greater Intimacy with Christ

David, a 2-year old with leukemia, was taken by his mother, Deborah, to Massachusetts General Hospital in Boston, to see Dr. John Truman who specializes in treating children with cancer and various blood diseases. Dr. Truman's prognosis was devastating: "He has a 50-50 chance." The countless clinic visits, the blood tests, the intravenous drugs, the fear and pain--the mother's ordeal can be almost as bad as the child's because she must stand by, unable to bear the pain herself. David never cried in the waiting room,

and although his friends in the clinic had to hurt him and stick needles in him, he hustled in ahead of his mother with a smile, sure of the welcome he always got. When he was three, David had to have a spinal tap--a painful procedure at any age. It was explained to him that, because he was sick, Dr. Truman had to do something to make him better. "If it hurts, remember it's because he loves you," Deborah said. The procedure was horrendous. It took three nurses to hold David still, while he yelled and sobbed and struggled. When it was almost over, the tiny boy, soaked in sweat and tears, looked up at the doctor and gasped, "Thank you, Dr. Tooman, for my hurting." *Monica Dickens, Miracles of Courage, 1985.*